

Education Committee
Wednesday, March 15, 2023
House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to
Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee:

My name is AJ Ceylan and I am a resident of Bridgewater. I am currently a student at the University of Connecticut studying Speech and Hearing Sciences. I offer the following testimony in support of HB 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators:

Paraeducators are on the front lines of student learning. They provide one-on-one assistance to special education students, reinforce instruction, manage classrooms and support English language learners. They celebrate with their students when they succeed and try to redirect them when they act out verbally and physically. Despite the important roles they play, paraeducators are among the lowest paid staff members in our schools. They can't afford their healthcare and there is little chance they can afford to retire with dignity - unless they work a second or third job. They don't get paid during the summer and they can't collect unemployment. There is no wonder paraeducators are leaving the profession in droves, leaving more than 1,300 paraeducator positions vacant in districts throughout the state.

HB 6881 is an important step in improving the work life and career opportunities of Connecticut's paraeducators. But most of all this bill is an opportunity to begin to treat paraeducators with the respect and dignity they have earned.

In 2001, I was born 17 weeks early with little or no chance of survival. I spent 6 1/2 months in the ICU and my parents were told to "Go home and water your child. He is going to be a vegetable." Can you imagine how that made my parents feel? I'm thankful that my mother and father chose to believe in me and not statistics. I have cerebral palsy and I struggle with simple life tasks every single day. Yet, my disability has never stopped me. Does it throw me curve balls? Absolutely, but that's what makes me stronger and allows me to push through anything.

I've pushed through over 60 surgeries and countless hours of physical, occupational and speech therapies. All of that hard work has paid off. I am now a senior at UConn and will graduate in May

with a bachelor's degree in speech and hearing sciences with the hope to continue my education and eventually become a Doctor of Audiology.

I could not have come this far without my 1:1 paraeducators that I had in the Danbury Public School System from the age of 3-18. My paras were second to none and went above and beyond their call of duty to help me be the best that I could be. There were two that stood by my side, each for years at a time.

The first one was when I was in elementary school. Ms. Kelly taught me basic skills that I will carry with me forever. She taught me organizational skills, how to read, how to organize my thoughts on paper and out loud, how to socialize in an acceptable way, how to unscrew a top of a water bottle, how to walk safely in a crowded area and so much more. She had cancer and other medical issues, but she still showed up to work every day to help ME! Her family even took her away on vacation after her treatments were complete and she bought my parents and I each back a t-shirt. I will never forget that.

The other para I will never forget is Ms. Ginny. She was with me in middle school and high school. She was my second mother. I couldn't get away with anything. She taught me how to organize my studying and notebooks. If I didn't buy the correct materials at the beginning of the year, she would physically go out and buy them for me. She would spend her own money and do it on her own time, just to ensure my success. Ms. Ginny also taught me how to advocate for myself. She gave me strength in more ways than she will ever know. She was my rock.

Now that my mother is a paraeducator, giving back to the community that gave so much to me, I have an all new respect for paras. I see how exhausted she is after a difficult day and how hard she works just to put food on the table for my family. She loves her students like they are her own children and worries about them even when she isn't working. I've also seen my mother come home with bite marks, black eyes, scratches and so much more. Five years ago, a student hurt her so badly that she had to have surgery and was out of work for 5 months. It scares my brother and I so much when she comes home injured but she keeps telling us that her students need her and that it's ok.

Paraeducators are heroes in my eyes because they help students like me that can't do everything on their own. We need help and paras are our parents away from home, constantly educating us and protecting us.

Now is the time for this committee and all the members of the General Assembly to take immediate and meaningful action to raise paraeducator pay, lower their healthcare costs, ensure they have meaningful retirement benefits and give them the tools they need to help students succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Please support student learning by prioritizing paraeducators and passing HB 6881.

AJ Ceylan
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